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ABSTRACT

This report examines preschool and early primary education in the Chicago (Illinois) public schools, and its impact on disadvantaged minority children. Statistical data were gathered by a survey of 196 kindergarten teachers. For comparison, the survey was also sent to kindergarten teachers in Wilmette (Illinois), a Chicago suburb. Part 1, "City Kids Behind at the Start," compares the entry-level skills of kindergarten students in the city schools with those in the suburbs. Part 2, "Preschool Can Benefit Low-Income Children," discusses the advantages of preschool programs for low-income minority children, criticizes a proposed state spending plan for preschool programs, and examines a proposal for combining preschool and day care facilities. Part 3, "The Play's the Thing in Kindergarten," reviews preschool and primary basic skills curricula and learning activities, and discusses the negative effects of summer vacation on disadvantaged students. Part 4, "How Parents Are Failing to Prepare Kids," examines the parents' role in helping their children to learn, and parenting skills. Part 5, "'Invisible' Gifted Lost Forever," discusses the need for programs for gifted minority students. Statistical data are included on seven graphs and charts. (FMW)

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The Critical Years: City Kids Left Behind at the Start

William Braden And Others

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Chicago Sun-Times

A SPECIAL REPRINT SECTION

The Critical Years: City kids behind at the start

As part of its yearlong exploration of education issues, the Chicago Sun-Times took a close look at the critical years: the preschool and early primary grade years, the years that can lay the foundation for failure or success.

Education writer Linda Lenz and reporters William Braden, Don Hayner, Alf Siewers and Neil Steinberg surveyed Chicago public school kindergarten teachers, reviewed decades of research and interviewed children, parents, educators and experts in early childhood education.

Expanded preschool education programs have been a key recommendation in the ongoing push for reform of Chicago's public schools. But the Sun-Times team found that focusing on preschool education is not enough. Many early childhood experts believe the critical years for learning begin at birth. Many say that lifelong patterns for failure or success may be set by age 3, and certainly by age 8.

The Sun-Times' five-part series appeared June 26 through June 30, 1988.

By William Braden

Most children enter the Chicago public school system unable to speak in complete simple sentences. Unable to identify a square, circle and triangle. Unable to tell you their first and last names.

Most cannot sit still to listen to a brief story, nor can they tell a brief story with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Most cannot correctly hold a pencil or crayon, nor can they draw a recognizable complete human figure.

In suburban Wilmette, by comparison, the vast majority of children entering public school can perform all of those tasks.

In Chicago, most children starting public school have not been read to by their parents. And most have never been to a zoo, library or museum.

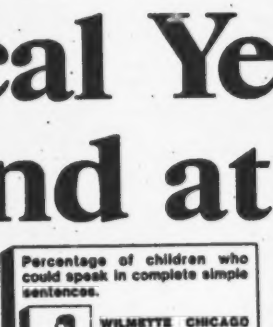
In Wilmette, the vast majority of children starting public school have been read to by their parents. And almost all have been to a zoo, library or museum.

Those are among the findings of a Chicago Sun-Times study designed to gauge the importance for education of "the critical years"—the preschool and early primary grade years.

The study shows that Chicago's public schools are overwhelmed with children who start school unprepared to do traditional schoolwork; this is especially so in low-income areas.

The study demonstrates that low-income children during the critical years may benefit significantly from preschool programs.

The study also underscores the crucial role of parenting in academic success; it shows that most parents—including low-income parents—very much want such success for their children but that many lack the skills to help the children achieve it.


Percentage of children who could speak in complete simple sentences.
WILMETTE CHICAGO
92% 48%
Percentage of students who could tell you both their first and last names.
WILMETTE CHICAGO
97% 49%
Percentage of children who could identify the colors of red, blue and yellow.
WILMETTE CHICAGO
90% 50%

Discussing the findings, philanthropist Irving Harris said:

"The sad thing is, these kids are not only illiterate—they're incompetent. There's a difference. You don't have to be literate to have common sense and be able to do things. But many of these kids are brought up to be quite incompetent."

The study is based on a Sun-Times survey of Chicago public kindergarten teachers that was conducted May 20-26, 1988, along with a comparison survey of Wilmette kindergarten teachers.

The sharp disparity between Chicago and affluent Wilmette isn't the children's fault. Rather, it dramatizes the impact of socioeconomic status on children's readiness for school. And it shows how far behind Chicago public school pupils are when they start out, compared with where they should or could be.

In Chicago, 74 percent of the pupils in the survey were from low-income families (compared with 4 percent in Wilmette). And the Chicago teachers estimated that 44 percent of the low-income children were unprepared to start school. Citywide, 42 percent were judged unprepared.

The most frequently cited causes of unpreparedness—in order—were lack of social skills, poor attention span, lack of language skills and poor fine-motor skills.

Among Chicago public kindergartners in the survey:

- 52 percent could not speak in complete simple sentences, compared with 8 percent in Wilmette.
- 59 percent could not identify a square, circle and triangle, compared with 18 percent in Wilmette.
- 51 percent could not tell you their first and last names, compared with 3 percent in Wilmette.
- 51 percent could not sit still to listen to a brief story, compared with 13 percent in Wilmette.
- 74 percent could not tell a brief story that contains roughly a beginning, a middle and an end, compared with 39 percent in Wilmette.
- 52 percent could not not correctly hold a pencil or crayon, compared with 35 percent in Wilmette.
- 55 percent could not draw a recognizable complete human figure, such as a stick figure, compared with 24 percent in Wilmette.
- 50 percent could not identify the primary colors of red, blue and yellow, compared with 10 percent in Wilmette.
- 56 percent could not settle disputes with other children without physical aggression, compared with 30 percent in Wilmette.
- 32 percent seemed to lack self-esteem, compared with 24 percent in Wilmette.

(Among low-income Chicago pupils, the rates of failure were even higher than they were citywide.)

There is far from universal agreement on the significance of all these categories as predictors of academic success.

For example, many Chicago teachers express dismay at the apparent inability of so many children to tell you their first and last names. In many cases, say the teachers, children start kindergarten knowing only their family

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SUN-TIMES/Phil Velasquez

Barbara Bowman says Chicago schoolchildren who can't recite their first and last names have a problem only if teachers interpret the failure as stupidity.

How Sun-Times study was conducted

This Chicago Sun-Times study is based on responses to a first-ever questionnaire distributed to a random sample of kindergarten teachers in the Chicago public schools.

Questionnaires were sent to 285 teachers, and 196 (69 percent) responded.

Those responding teach 7,122 children, or 24 percent of kindergarten enrollment citywide.

For comparison, the 45-item questionnaire was sent as well to Wilmette's six kindergarten teachers. Four responded.

The questionnaire was designed by Sun-Times reporters Don Hayner, Linda Lenz, William Braden, Alf Siewers and Neil Steinberg with the help of the Board of Education research department, early childhood specialists at the Erikson Institute and psychologist Joan Costello, faculty associate at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

It was then refined in focus group sessions with outstanding kindergarten and preschool teachers, identified by the specialists.

A pretest was conducted with 27 teachers in Districts 2 on the North Side and District 4 on the West Side.

The questionnaires were distributed through the Board of Education's internal mail system on May 20.

Cover letters asked teachers to return them to their principals in sealed envelopes provided by the Sun-Times. Reporters spread out over the city May 26 to pick up completed questionnaires.

Teachers were asked to give the total number of children they teach and then estimate what percentage could do various things, such as count five objects, at the beginning of the school year. Teachers also were asked to estimate what percentage of children had parents who did various things associated with learning, such as reading to them.

The questionnaire also sought teachers' assessments of the effects of preschool. And it asked them to estimate how much of their own money they spent on their classes this school year.

The total: $46,808, or an average of $238.

Systemwide percentages were obtained through computer analysis.

Pupils were designated low-income if they were in classes where teachers said 70 to 100 percent of their children were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. This group represented 74 percent of the sample. The School Board pegs the low-income enrollment in elementary schools at 78 percent.

For evaluation purposes, the Sun-Times identified classes as "preschool classes" if teachers said a majority of their children had attended preschool.

Linda Lenz

THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 1

City kids behind at start

Continued from Page 1

nicknames. But this does not disturb Barbara Bowman, an authority on early childhood education at Chicago's Erikson Institute.

"It's probably a cultural difference," said Bowman.

"My best guess is that these kids tend to live in communities in which people know one another much more intimately, and they have less experience telling people their names."

The children quickly learn to recite the names on their birth certificates, said Bowman.

And there's a problem only if teachers interpret the initial failure as a sign of stupidity—and lower their expectations for pupil performance.

There's a real danger teachers will interpret it that way, of course.

In any case, the study results taken as a whole clearly demonstrate that most public school children in Chicago start off unprepared for traditional schoolwork.

Inability to speak in complete simple sentences, for example, might signal that a child has not developed sufficient language structure to understand the teacher's instructions. Inability to hold a pencil or crayon could in some cases suggest poorly developed fine-motor skills. Inability to identify primary colors might indicate absence of a language environment in which people talk about the colors of things.

What the study really demonstrates is the cruel impact of poverty in Chicago, where almost 8 of 10 public elementary school pupils are poor.

And it raises the possibility that the decline in academic achievement here in recent decades does not necessarily reflect a collapse of the educational system so much as a dramatic change in the nature of the pupil population: the emergence of a chronically poor underclass of largely one-parent families, many of them headed by teenage girls with few parenting skills.

"All except one child in my class of 24 comes from a one-parent family," wrote one of the kindergarten teachers surveyed.

"The parents are kids themselves," another teacher wrote.

"Most of the women that we've talked to at the Robert Taylor Homes don't even know they're pregnant until they're four or five months along," said Harris, sponsor of the innovative Beethoven Project to support families in the Taylor homes area.

"We're talking about a failed social policy," said Chicago Schools Supt. Manford Byrd Jr.

"We cannot continue years and years of neglect of families and failing to support them and simply think that we can build a schoolhouse and take their children in and their children will equal the output of children everywhere."

But this doesn't take schools off the hook, Byrd agreed. Ted Sanders, the Illinois education superintendent, agreed.

"The schools aren't prepared to deal with the children who come to them," said Sanders, reacting to the Sun-Times study. "The survey shows that 44 percent of low-income children are markedly behind their peers developmentally when they arrive at the schoolhouse door. That's not a child's failure. But the school system fails because it is not prepared to deal with him when he shows up.

"The schools are not adjusting to deal with the range of developmental levels. And it becomes easy to let these children fall by the wayside."

But Byrd and Sanders said the Sun-Times survey also provides clear evidence that preschool education can play a significant role in offsetting the effects of poverty.

Manford Byrd Jr.

"The findings really support the notion that preschool can help kids do better," said Byrd. "I'm a firm believer in preschool education for kids who would otherwise start out behind and maybe never really make up the difference. Dollars are better spent early on than later on. It's developmental when you start early on.

"It's remedial when you spend later on. It makes more sense, and is cheaper, to build than to mend."

Sanders, a longtime advocate of expanded state support for preschool, said:

"Anybody who reads the numbers in this survey ought to be persuaded of the importance of these programs and the fact they can make a difference."

Sanders said educators should make the school system more responsive to the needs of low-income children. But that is not enough, he said.

And he singled out what he called "the devastating statistic" in the study that shows 95 percent preschool participation in Wilmette compared with 41 percent in Chicago.

"It's a matter of economics," he said.

"The parents whose children most need this advantage can't afford it, and, therefore, can't access it unless it is publicly made available for them.

"And the earlier we get to these children, the better off we'll be. Instead of just trying to offset their deficits when they get to school, we should be trying to accelerate their development when they're younger."

WHAT HIGHER-INCOME KIDS CAN DO

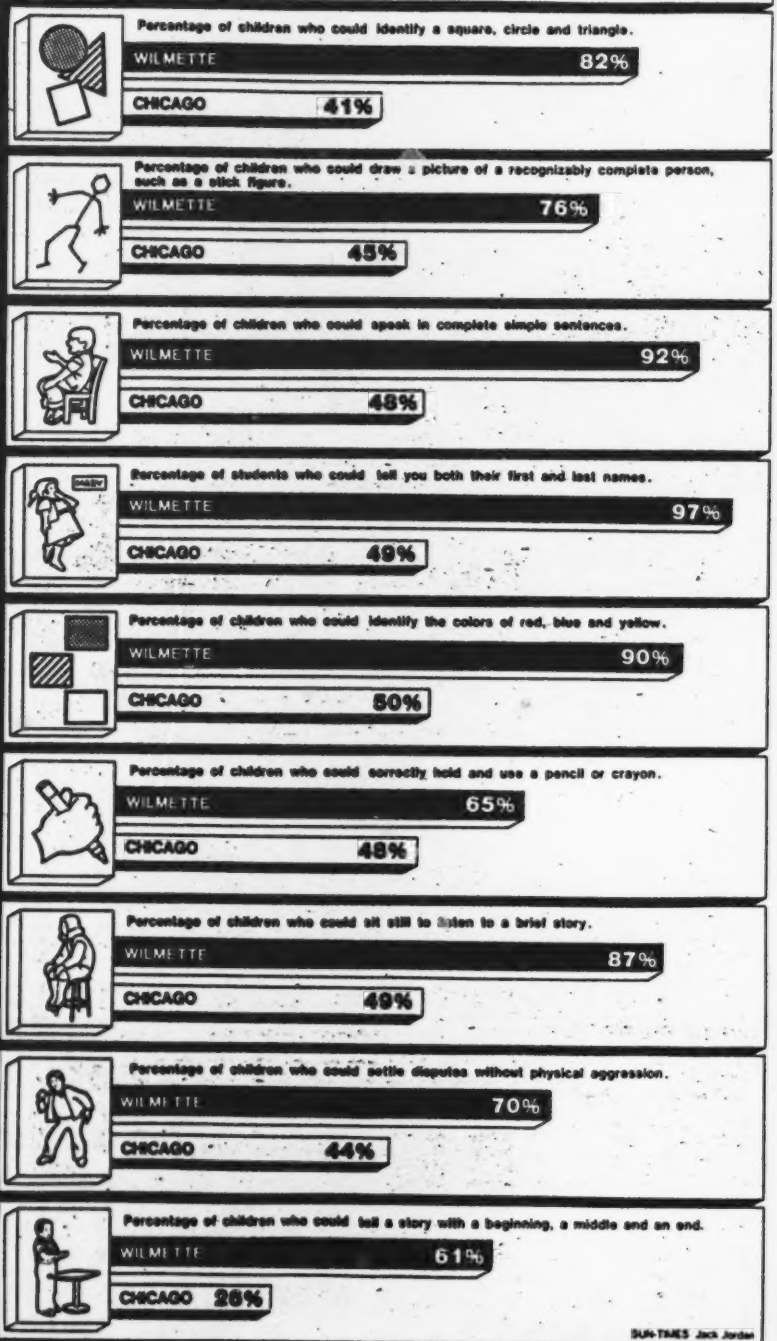
Chicago kindergartners in classes that are not "low-income" seem to have about the same skills as Wilmette kindergartners. This chart compares Wilmette kindergartners with Chicago kindergartners in classes that, according to teachers, had no low-income pupils.

Percentage of children who can:	Chicago	Wilmette
Identify square, circle and triangle	84%	82%
Speak in complete sentences	83%	92%
Print first and last names	30%	28%
Identify red, blue, yellow	88%	90%
Tell a brief story	57%	61%

Chicago's kindergartners behind at the start

A Chicago Sun-Times study shows that Chicago's schools are overwhelmed with children who aren't ready to do traditional schoolwork.

The chart below, drawn from a survey of public school teachers in Wilmette and Chicago, compares kindergarten children's readiness. The results underscore the crucial role parents and preschool programs play during the critical early years.


Percentage of children who could identify a square, circle and triangle.
WILMETTE 82%
CHICAGO 41%
Percentage of children who could draw a picture of a recognizably complete person, such as a stick figure.
WILMETTE 76%
CHICAGO 45%
Percentage of children who could speak in complete simple sentences.
WILMETTE 92%
CHICAGO 48%
Percentage of students who could tell you both their first and last names.
WILMETTE 97%
CHICAGO 49%
Percentage of children who could identify the colors of red, blue and yellow.
WILMETTE 90%
CHICAGO 50%
Percentage of children who could correctly hold and use a pencil or crayon.
WILMETTE 65%
CHICAGO 48%
Percentage of children who could sit still to listen to a brief story.
WILMETTE 87%
CHICAGO 49%
Percentage of children who could settle disputes without physical aggression.
WILMETTE 70%
CHICAGO 44%
Percentage of children who could tell a story with a beginning, a middle and an end.
WILMETTE 61%
CHICAGO 26%
SUN-TIMES Jack Jordan

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES 3

THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 2

Preschool can benefit low-income children

By Linda Lenz
and William Braden

The temperature was pushing 90. The air-conditioning was out. But that didn't faze the 4-year-olds in the Woodson South Child Parent Center on the South Side. They were on.

At the math table, five were engaged in a serious game of war. That's the card game where everyone draws a card and the player with the highest number gets to scoop up all the other cards. At Woodson, the game is called "more," after the concept being "taught."

At the neighboring "writing" table, a boy and a girl were drawing pictures and embellishing them with scribbles. The boy then "read" his story to a teacher aide, who printed it for him.

In the corner playhouse, three boys were taking plastic vegetables, fruits and meats out of cupboards. Each piece had its place, marked with a picture and the name of the food. That way, when it came time to put the food away, the boys were drawn into the mental activities of matching and making a connection between the food and its name as it appears in print.

Elsewhere, youngsters were painting at easels, pasting collages, paging through books and making trains and bridges out of blocks and construction toys.

Surveying this noisy, multi-ring circus, Jacquelynne Gilmore, principal of the child parent center and its home school, Woodson South, smiled and said: "They're learning. They're learning through play."

Woodson is situated in one of the poorest communities in Chicago. For want of money, time or know-how, parents there don't provide the environment for learning that typifies middle-class homes.

The Board of Education's child parent centers; the new state-funded preschool program; Head Start, and a variety of community preschool programs are helping fill in the gap for about 40 percent of such families, a Chicago Sun-Times study shows.

According to a random sample of Chicago public school kindergarten teachers, 69 percent of low-income children with preschool were prepared for kindergarten, while only 46 percent of low-income children without preschool were prepared.

The same picture emerged when teachers were asked to report how many of their pupils could do specific things. For example:

- More than 5 out of 10 children with preschool could tell their teachers both their first and last names and could speak in complete, simple sentences. For children without preschool, the ratio was less than 4 in 10.
- 6 out of 10 children with preschool could identify the colors red, blue and yellow. For children without preschool, the ratio was 4 in 10.
- More than 5 out of 10 children with preschool could draw a recognizable complete human figure, such as a stick figure. For children without preschool, the ratio was slightly more than 3 in 10.

These and other tasks on the Sun-Times questionnaire were suggested by early childhood specialists and classroom teachers as indicators whether children had received the kind of verbal and mental stimulation that prepares them for school.

Dorothy Miller, a consultant from the Erikson Institute literacy program, reads a story at the Woodson South Child Parent Center on the South Side. Many city pupils have not had the advantage of parents who read to them as toddlers.

While preschool helped, it did not bring low-income children up to the level of middle-income children. On only one item did poor children with preschool come out as well as middle-income children—28 percent could print their first and last names, compared to 17 percent of the more affluent children.

The value of preschool for children from low-income homes was underscored again when teachers were asked if kindergartners with preschool stayed ahead of their non-preschool classmates through-

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THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 2

Preschool helps poor kids

Continued from Page 3

out the school year.

In cognitive, or thinking, activities, 39 percent of the teachers said children with preschool were ahead a lot and another 33 percent said they were ahead a little.

Twenty percent said there was no difference between the two groups, and 8 percent said children with preschool were behind.

Child parent centers in particular received a vote of confidence.

Fifty-seven percent of teachers whose classes had a majority of such youngsters said pupils with preschool were a lot ahead of their non-preschool classmates in cognitive activities. Another 19 percent said they were ahead a little.

A similar—but weaker—pattern emerged when teachers rated the social behavior of children who attended preschool: Youngsters with preschool tended to do better—but not as much better as they did in cognitive activities—and children who had attended child parent center preschools did best of all.

Child parent centers are the Cadillac of Chicago school programs. Created 21 years ago with the first gush of federal "War on Poverty" funds, they consist of four to 11 classes of 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds served by a head teacher, a clerk, a parent resource teacher, a school-community liasion, classroom teachers and several classroom aides (though not one for every classroom). Class size is limited to 20, and classrooms are amply equipped.

Compare that to the description of a kindergarten that one teacher scrawled across the Sun-Times questionnaire:

"There are over 30 children with one teacher and an aide, assigned for 45 minutes daily. My budget totals $40 for next year. If I want materials I have to rely on proceeds from doughnut sales or my own funds."

The Head Start and state-funded preschool programs have staffing similar to that in child parent centers. But because classes are dispersed—with no more than two to a school—they don't have the benefit of full-time, on-site supervision and support, except for the principal.

Child-parent centers stand out not only for their resources but also for the steps they take to bolster parents, help them help their children and, in the process, establish a good relationship between home and school.

Parent rooms are the site of lessons in crafts, child development, everyday economics, high school subjects and English.

Children aren't accepted for the program unless parents promise to participate and serve as volunteer helpers in their children's classrooms.

Marilyn Flores goes daily to the parent room at the Von Humboldt Child Parent Center, 1345 N. Rockwell, where two of her children are enrolled. There she has learned how to sew, make artificial flowers and create activity books for her children.

She has learned important lessons from her children's teachers, too, like: Hitting children does not help them learn.

"I used to hit my child," said Flores. "My son's teacher taught me [not to] . . . . She was so patient. I wanted to be patient, too."

Marina Montijo, who has three children at the Von Humboldt center, said she's learned how to play with her children in a way that helps them learn.

"You have to be like a child," she said.

"You can't just sit there. You have to work with them, go on the floor with them, be a child just like them. They enjoy that."

In turn, Montijo is teaching her husband what she has learned about interacting with children.

"I tell him to ask the kids questions, and he does," she said.

"He asks the kids questions and they get involved."

The enthusiasm of Flores and Montijo illustrate a theory early childhood experts have about the preschool advantage: Parents who enroll their children probably are more supportive to begin with, as suggested by the fact that they enrolled their children.

Like many other school programs, child parent centers have suffered from budget cuts. At one time they were served by their own teams of social workers, speech therapists and nurses.

At one time they also extended through third grade instead of just kindergarten. Older children who had enrolled as 3-year-olds scored at the national average on reading tests, board officials say.

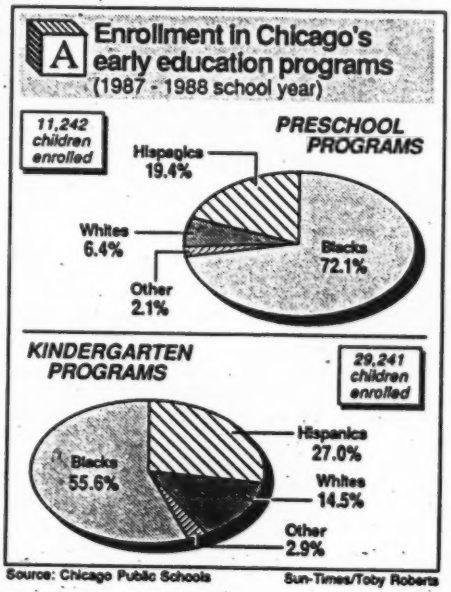
But that success became the program's undoing in the early primary grades.

In 1974, the year the program won official recognition as a national model, the federal government cut off funding for grades one, two and three. The children in these grades were no longer educationally disadvantaged, the feds argued, and therefore were not entitled to money earmarked for the disadvantaged.

While the Sun-Times study makes a case for child parent centers and other early intervention programs, controversy has dogged most research on the effectiveness of preschool—and especially so the many years of study on the federal government's Head Start program.

Project Head Start was launched in 1965, as part of the War on Poverty, to provide preschool experience for low-income children.

Positive points of starting early likely to benefit low-income kids



Source: Chicago Public Schools

Sun-Times/Toby Roberts

In 1969, a major study by the Westinghouse Learning Corporation and Ohio State University concluded that the program produced no lasting benefits and was not worth the cost.

More recently, Head Start commissioned a massive survey that examined every study ever done of the program, published and unpublished. The result was the Synthesis Project, which concluded in 1985 that:

- Head Start pupils enjoy significant immediate gains in intellectual ability as measured by IQ and achievement test scores.
- Two years after Head Start, low-income children who did not take part in Head Start catch up with the Head Start children. The Head Start children do not regress. But they do not maintain their advantage in IQ and test scores.

The Synthesis survey reported that a few studies do find evidence of some long-term effects: that Head Start alums down the line are less likely to be retained in grade and less likely to be placed in special education classes.

Such long-term benefits also were found by the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies at Cornell University (1983), which analyzed the impact of 11 experimental early-intervention programs.

But only two of those programs were Head Start programs. The others were privately sponsored initiatives that were well-funded and professionally staffed. And one of those was the widely publicized Perry Preschool Project conducted by David Weikart in Ypsilanti, Mich.

The Perry project produced "real life" gains that have lasted more than two decades—including a reduced delinquency and arrest rate, a reduced teenage pregnancy rate, an increased employment rate at age 19 and a decreased rate of welfare dependency at age 19. And its sponsors estimate that every dollar spent on the experimental project saved up to $6 in social costs.

Head Start advocates argue that a preschool program can not provide a one-shot inoculation that will carry children successfully through all their years of schooling.

"I think the data tell us that Head Start does a very effective job of preparing children for public school," said Allen N. Smith, a research psychologist who served as government project officer for the Synthesis survey. "I think the public school does not do an equally good job of dealing with those children."

Smith added:

"What is needed really is more emphasis on public school activities that would allow for the same level of growth that children attained when they were in Head Start. And we have been working with public school systems in the last year or two to develop transition-oriented programs that would in fact enhance that kind of continuity in academic stimulation."

But the federal government actually started trying that back in 1967, when it introduced a national program called Project Follow Through to build on the gains children had made in Head Start.

The project was supposed to be a major service program, as extensive as Head Start, that would extend education intervention through third grade.

Follow Through still has its ardent champions, who say it has produced some excellent individual programs. But the over-all operation didn't live up to expectations. And it survives today only at a much-reduced level of funding.

What's the bottom line here?

Some advocates of early intervention suggest that programs including Head Start don't start soon enough.

That case is argued by Burton L. White, director of the Center for Parent Education in Newton, Mass., and author of The First Three Years of Life.

By age 3, said White, most children headed for scholastic difficulty are already significantly behind their peers in intellectual and linguistic skills.

"Good language acquisition is the best single indicator of brain power," he said. "And poor language acquisition is the single most common problem associated with underachievement in school."

White continued:

"There is no language ability at birth. A child by age 1 may understand five to 10 words and a few instructions like 'wave bye-bye.'

By age 3, the average child understands roughly 70 percent of everything he's going to use in ordinary conversation for his entire lifetime.

"The child who is delayed at age 3 when he enters Head Start invariably, with virtually no exceptions, is behind on language. And if he's nine months or more behind on language, the chances are very good he'll never be an average student. Ever.

"The probability that any Head Start program is going to make him even average is very, very low."

White said "modest success" can be achieved under special conditions by a few well-funded and highly sophisticated programs like Perry Preschool. But such remediation, he said, is very expensive, hard to do—and, even under the best of circumstances, unlikely to completely reverse early losses.

Others, including Lisbeth B. Schorr, view preschool success stories as far from modest.

Looking at the same data, in her book Within Our Reach, Schorr writes of "two decades of dazzling successes in providing care and education for disadvantaged preschool children."

She pronounces Head Start "one of the most successful legacies of the War on Poverty," and she concludes: "The basic Head Start model has proved to be sound . . . The results are measurable and dramatic."

The middle ground is taken by Perry Preschool's Weikart and his High/Scope colleague, Lawrence J. Schweinhart, who criticize the Synthesis survey for lumping together all Head Start projects.

"Despite what Allen Smith says," said Schweinhart, "I don't think you can draw any conclusions about a national project with the variety in it of Head Start. You can't say unequivocably that Head Start works or Head Start doesn't work.

"You've got good Head Start programs, and you've got bad ones. You can say that's it's hard to find long-term effects, that there are very few longitudinal studies, that the study designs are generally not good enough to find long-term effects.

"But you can't go beyond that and make general claims about Head Start."

Weikart and Schweinhart even object to enthusiasts who say that the Perry Preschool track record proves that Head Start works, or that preschool works.

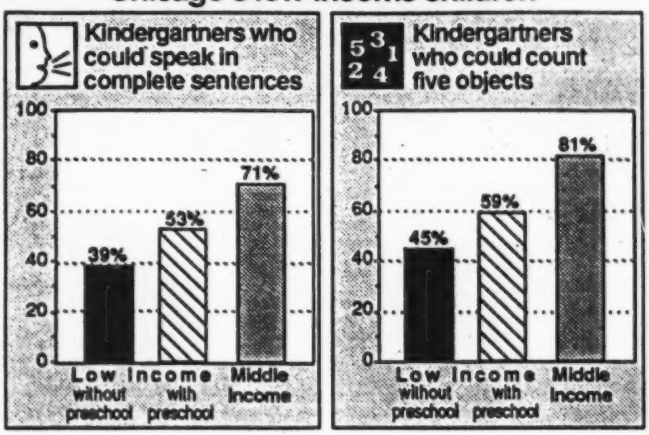
That record, they say, proves only that a preschool program can work—if it is a quality program with adequate funding, a skilled staff and a carefully planned curriculum.

They add that high-risk children deserve such programs—and White agrees—because preschool has now become the norm for children in this country, which is supposed to be a country of equal educational opportunity. As Weikart and Schweinhart put it:

"The majority of parents who can afford to enroll their children in preschool programs do so, and they seem to do so regardless of the weight of evidence on program effectiveness . . . . Therefore, program effectiveness aside, preschool program participation for low-income children is an issue of equity."

Ali Siewers also contributed to this story.

The preschool advantage for Chicago's low-income children



What Chicago kindergartners could do

	Low income without preschool	Low income with preschool	Middle income
Could tell you their first and last names	37%	55%	71%
Could identify square, circle, triangle	32%	48%	58%
Could identify red, blue and yellow	40%	60%	67%
Could draw a recognizable human figure	34%	52%	68%
Could print their first and last names	14%	26%	17%
Could correctly hold and use pencil or crayon	36%	55%	68%
Could sit still to listen to a brief story	43%	51%	66%
Could settle disputes without physical aggression	35%	43%	61%
Could tell brief story with a beginning, middle and end	17%	32%	42%
Seemed to lack self-esteem	44%	29%	20%

Note: Low-income figures were derived from classes in which teachers said 70 to 100 percent of their children were from low-income homes.
Middle-income figures were derived from classes in which teachers said 0-20 percent of their children were from low-income homes.
The "with preschool" figures were derived from classes in which teachers reported a majority of their children had preschool experience.
The "without preschool" figures were derived from classes in which teachers reported a majority of their children had not attended preschool.

Source: Responses to Chicago Sun-Times survey of Chicago Public School kindergarten teachers, May, 1988.

Sun-Times/Toby Roberts

Analysis shows preschool plan still falls short

By Linda Lenz

Gov. Thompson's proposed state spending plans, which bank on a uncertain tax increase, would increase by about 60 percent the number of youngsters in Chicago public school preschool programs, a Chicago Sun-Times analysis shows.

But even with that increase, only about 37 percent of eligible youngsters could be served.

Moreover, there are no plans to alleviate two problems the programs encounter: finding space in overcrowded, largely Hispanic neighborhoods, which are underserved, and accommodating the schedules of working parents.

This school year, the state spent $12.7 million on preschool instruction. Thompson wants to spend $46 million next year. For Chicago, that could mean an extra $15 million, which would lift the system's preschool budget to about $40 million for 1988-89.

About an extra 6,300 children could be served, totaling some 17,000, or 37 percent of the low-income 3- and 4-year-olds headed for Chicago kindergartens, the Sun-Times analysis shows.

Board of Education preschool instruction currently serves some 10,500 youngsters, or about 23 percent of the at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds. The cost is about $2,300 a child in half-day attendance, or about twice the cost for instruction systemwide.

The Board of Education has no data on the number of kindergartners who attend preschool programs operated outside the system. (Half of the city's Head Start programs, for example, are operated by churches and community groups.)

But kindergarten teachers responding to a Sun-Times survey estimated that about 40 percent of their low-income youngsters had some kind of school experience before kindergarten.

The shortchanging of Hispanics can be seen by comparing their share of Chicago public school kindergarten enrollment—27 percent—to their share of preschool enrollment—19 percent.

Asked about the discrepancy, Chicago School Supt. Manford Byrd Jr. said the state should earmark some preschool money to build prefabricated classrooms in overcrowded neighborhoods.

The Illinois Day Care Action Council is especially critical of the state for focusing on half-day programs, which create problems for working parents who must arrange for the rest of the day.

Mary Whelan, chairman of the council's advocacy committee, also said the parent classes, considered crucial by child development experts, should be offered in evenings, as well.

Furthermore, she added, the state should take steps to tie its preschool programs to other social services that communities offer.

New twist: merging day care, education

By Alf Siewers

Some call it the fruit of hard economic times. Some call it "the Sovietization of the American family." Others see it as part of a liberation of women. For most, it's becoming just a way of life.

Whatever the cause, U.S. families are becoming more dependent on non-family care for babies and toddlers than ever before.

And legislators, parents and educators are grappling with ways to merge preschool facilities and day care into what could be a new phase of public education that starts at birth.

In Illinois, some 100,000 children, most younger than 6, qualify for state day care subsidies because of income requirements and working parents, said Thomas Villiger of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

But currently there are only some 18,000 full-time spaces for such children in state-subsidized day care programs.

Jerome Stermer, president of the Voices for Illinois Children advocacy group, noted that as publicly funded preschool and day care facilities increase, they will need to sort out their their respective roles more than ever before.

"It doesn't make sense to have children riding buses between preschool and day care programs," Stermer said. "We're going to be challenged to rethink the integration of child care and education."

Some preschool advocates for low-income children have expressed concern that they may be competing for public dollars with advocates of public funding of day care for middle-class working mothers.

Related issues being grappled with in Springfield and across the country also include paid maternity and paternity leaves and exploring the possibility of involving the elderly more in child care programs.

One federal proposal endorsed by preschool expert Burton White would provide tax-credit payments to all families of preschool children, even those who keep children at home, with larger amounts going to lower-income parents.

"Most children get a better start in life when, during the majority of their waking hours of their first three years, they are cared for by their parents or other nuclear family members, not by any form of substitute care," White wrote in his book *The First Three Years of Life*.

Stermer said, "I think we should be looking at both approaches. . . . If people are financially able, we ought to provide incentives for parents to be with their young children full time."

Attendance at preschool: No edge for middle class

The Chicago Sun-Times study of early childhood education demonstrates that low-income children with preschool experience start school better prepared than low-income children who don't attend preschool.

However, the study provides no clear evidence that preschool offers an advantage for middle-class children.

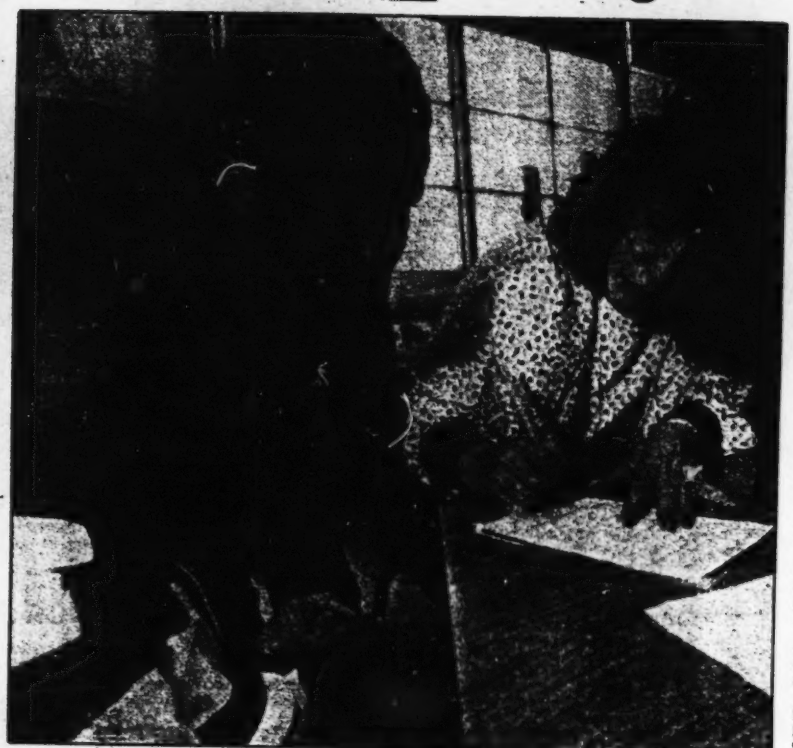
Educators suggest middle-class children without preschool may do as well as their middle-class peers with preschool because their home environments are as educationally stimulating as preschools. That same point was made by several Chicago kindergarten teachers responding to a Sun-Times survey.

"All of my children come from upper-middle-class homes," wrote Elaine Kaneshiro, who teaches at Edgebrook Elementary School, 6525 N. Hiawatha, and Wildwood Elementary School, 6950 N. Hiawatha. "Most of them are involved in learning through play at home and are involved in conversation and are introduced to many, varied experiences. With a good family background such as this, preschool is not crucial to the success of the child."

William Braden

THE CRITIC

The play's the thir



SUN-TIMES/Keith Hale

Teacher Diane Garch works with 4-year-old youngsters at the Woodson Child Parent Center, 4511 S. Evans, as she serves as a "scribe"—writing the story the boy is telling her. She has been adopting a new, structured play approach to replace traditional learning drills.

Vacation spoils kids' progress

By Linda Lenz

Chicago's public schools ran longer in 1988 to make up for a 19-day strike that also scratched part of winter break and all of spring break.

Yet, Nancy Hanvey, a kindergarten teacher at Kozminski Elementary School, 936 E. 54th, greeted summer vacation with a tinge of regret.

"Kindergartners and first-graders lose so much during those two months unless they have support at home," she said.

And the school system provides a stopgap for only a relative few. Its summer school program this year served only about a tenth of disadvantaged elementary school pupils.

In a recent report, the Ford Foundation described the summer loss in learning "a critical factor in children's long-term performance."

"When school is in session, advantaged and disadvantaged children learn at about the same rate," Gordon Berlin and Andrew Sum write in *Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families and Our Economic Future.*

"But during the summer months when schools are closed, home and peer influences reassert themselves. At the end of the summer, advantaged children actually score higher on a standardized test than they did when the summer started, while disadvantaged children fall further behind."

The report cites studies suggesting an estimated 80 percent of the extra learning that advantaged children attain from year to year occurs during the summer.

Berlin and Sum offer this explanation: "In advantaged homes, children are likely to read and be read to, and they are more likely to go to places of educational interest. Disadvantaged children watch more television and are less likely to use standard English, a particular problem for children in non-English-speaking households."

Responses to a Chicago Sun-Times survey of public school kindergarten teachers in Chicago and Wilmette underscore the experience gap: Only 43 percent of Chicago youngsters, compared to 96 percent of Wilmette youngsters, likely had been to a zoo, library, museum or other cultural or educational institute, teachers said.

Becoming a Nation of Readers, the 1985 landmark report on teaching reading, tells what a lack of experience can lead to:

"Children who have gone on trips, walked in parks and gone to zoos and museums will have more background knowledge relevant to reading in school than will children who have not had these experiences."

Reading, the report says, is the process of applying what's on the page to what's already in the head.

By Linda Lenz

On Monday, Nancy Hanvey wrote the number 173 on a piece of paper and stuck it high on a wall of her kindergarten classroom at Kozminski Elementary School, 936 E. 54th.

It was the 173rd day of the school year and the 173rd number Hanvey had posted in a row that stretches the length of two walls.

On the 100th day, pupils brought in 100 pieces of this and that—pennies and pins, buttons and baubles—for a 100-day celebration.

Through this simple exercise, children begin to get a sense of the passage of time, of what big numbers mean and of striving for a goal, like day 100, Hanvey explained.

"No big deal is made of it," she said. "They sort of internalize it."

The daily posting in Hanvey's classroom is one of hundreds of activities in a new math program that produced startling results during a tryout with 130 kindergartners in Chicago's inner city and several of its affluent suburbs.

At the beginning of the 1986-87 school year, the inner-city children did about half as well as their suburban counterparts on a variety of math tasks. At the end of the year, both groups had made substantial gains, with the inner-city children moving up to 80 percent of the performance level of the suburban children.

"I've been just amazed at how much little children can do and how much they want to do," said Hanvey, a co-author of the program. "At one time I didn't think they could count to 100. I thought it was impossible."

One morning last month, Hanvey's pupils, most of whom attended preschool, also were doing division with ice cream bar sticks and drawing their own story problems on slates.

Called Kindergarten Everyday Mathematics—KEM for short—the program is one product of the multimillion-dollar University of Chicago School Mathematics Project, which seeks to overhaul how mathematics is taught in American schools.

Beyond that, KEM illustrates a push by scholars in various disciplines, including reading, writing and science, to reshape teaching in the early grades so that it makes a better connection with the minds of young children, especially disadvantaged young children.

Echoing early childhood specialists, leading researchers in these fields decry a pervasive focus on rote skills, a reliance on paper-and-pencil exercises and a disregard for the knowledge children bring to class.

Here are some examples of what they don't like:

■ The scene was a Northwest Side kindergarten, but it could have been just about anywhere in the state. Children were sitting at desks, hunched over pieces of paper printed with dots and numbers. The children connected the dots, and everyone got a sticker for finishing the task without help.

But first they had a debate: Was the dot picture a muffin, vanilla ice cream or a banana split? "It's a cupcake," the teacher said, settling the dispute.

Then the children printed "cake" next to their pictures.

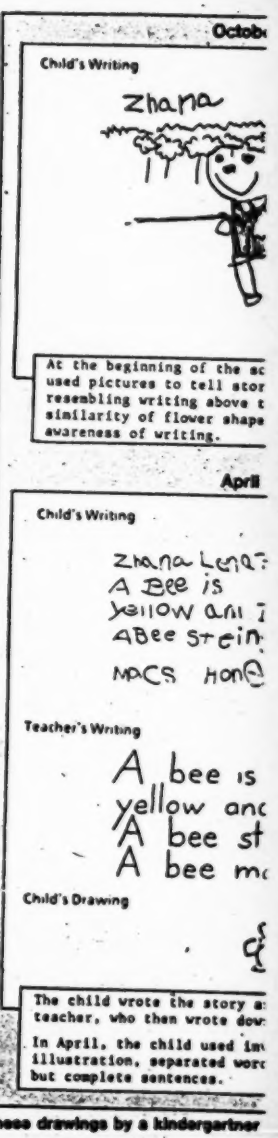
Next came worksheets requiring children to write out the names of numbers. And, finally, there were Mother's Day pictures to be colored.

■ Meanwhile, kindergartners at a North Side school took turns writing the numbers 1 to 30 in squares of a grid the teacher had drawn on a piece of poster board. Then the youngsters filled in their own grids, using the poster as a model.

■ At a South Side school, children were poring over pairs of pictures and letters—for example, a drawing of a bear with the letters a, t and b below it. The task: Circle the letter that makes the sound at the beginning of the word that the picture represents.

Both math and reading experts lament this approach to the basics.

"Math in school is so divorced from children's lives," said Jean Bell, a University of



These drawings by a kindergartner

Chicago math education researcher. only time you see numbers out of cont in tables—or school practice drills."

Nancy Hanvey's class has math drills But they're connected to real things they're usually done orally, so childre come comfortable with numbers.

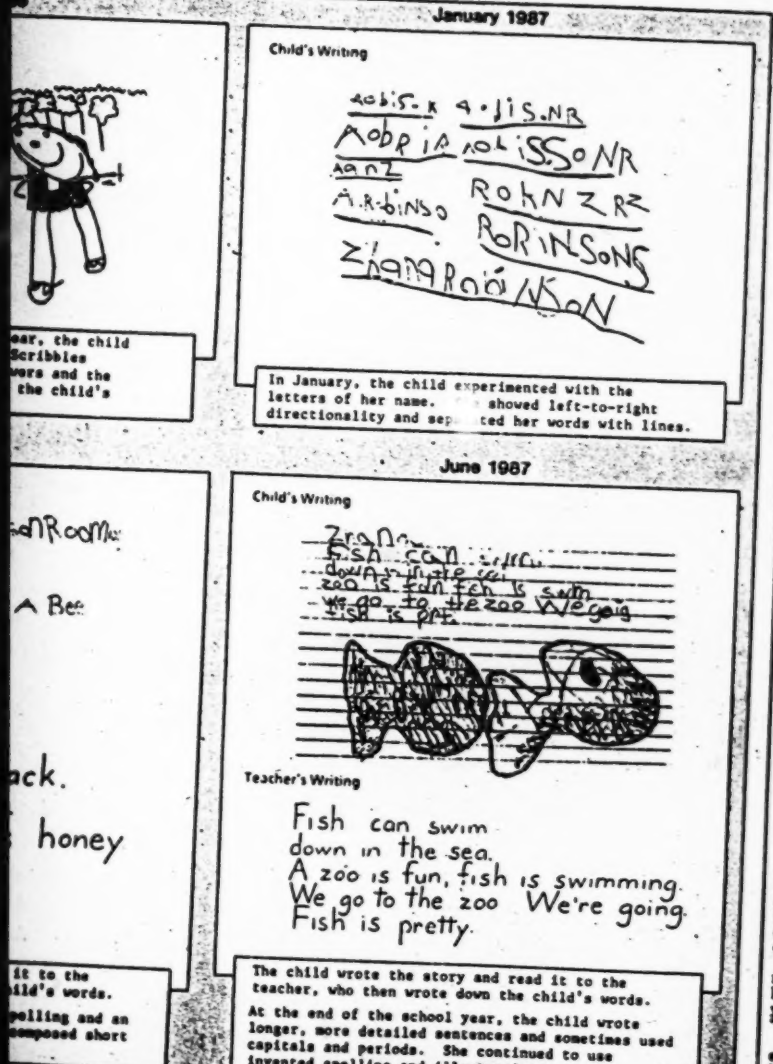
For example, every morning a girl c all the girls and a boy counts the boys loud. Then the counters write the nu on the chalkboard and add them toge

As for reading, the skills approach is "trying to teach someone how to play ball by showing him how to throw a ba not taking him to see a game," said C McNamee, a researcher and teacher of childhood education at Chicago's Eri Institute.

"If a kid came from a rich literacy envi ment, he could cope," she said.

But most children served by Chic public schools come from homes where

g in kindergarten


January 1987
Child's Writing
In January, the child experimented with the letters of her name. showed left-to-right directionality and sep ted her words with lines.
June 1987
Child's Writing
Fish can swim down in the sea. A zoo is fun, fish is swimming. We go to the zoo We're going. Fish is pretty.
Teacher's Writing
Fish can swim
down in the sea.
A zoo is fun, fish is swimming.
We go to the zoo We're going.
Fish is pretty.
The child wrote the story and read it to the teacher, who then wrote down the child's words.
At the end of the school year, the child wrote longer, more detailed sentences and sometimes used capitals and periods. She continued to use invented spelling and illustrations.

...ngles of emerging literacy from the School Board's new handbook on written composition.

...g and writing are not major preoccupations ..., as a result, the children don't know ...t reading and writing are all about.

"Children often don't know that words are ...parate units in the language because talk ...mes out as a stream," said Darrell Morris, ...reading specialist at the National College of ...ucation, based in Evanston.

A Board of Education handbook recom...ends that teachers of all-day kindergarten ...d to their children three times a day. ...Following reading experts' advice, the ...ook also encourages pretend writing as ...n introduction to reading. Children "write" ...eir own stories by drawing and scribbling. ...ey then dictate their stories to adults, who ...ite them down.

...rrounded by books and posters and ...dictated stories, children naturally try ...r hand at printing stories, inventing ...ling as they go.

...e Erikson Institute also recommends young authors select classmates to act out their stories. "That way they get the idea that words last when they're in print," explained Patricia Horsch, of Erikson. "And they can share their ideas through the dramatization."

Becoming a Nation of Readers, the landmark 1985 federal report on teaching reading, also advocates early, intensive phonics—the relationship between letters and speech sounds.

Using a program called Char L. Joy Williamson, a first-grade teacher at Byford Elementary School, 3600 W. Iowa, sends 10 children to the chalkboard and distributes slates to the rest of the class for lessons that involve writing and pronouncing words and using them in sentences.

In preschool and kindergarten, however, play designed with learning in mind should be the order of the day, early childhood experts say. But it's not in most Illinois kindergartens, according to the most recent study. In 1985 the Illinois Board of Education reported that 90 percent of kindergartens had an academic orientation.

Teachers Diane Gerch and Rose Bankhead are making the conversion to structured play for their 4-year-olds at the Woodson Child Parent Center, 4511 S. Evans.

Previously, Gerch and Bankhead directed many class activities and drilled children in the letter, number and thinking skills they were expected to learn. "We used to spend a lot of time drilling," said Bankhead. "And they got it. But they got it so much easier this way."

However, the teachers have had to reassure parents that their children are learning even though they are no longer bringing worksheets home.

Under the new approach, adopted with the help of the Erikson Institute, children have shown more creativity, seem more independent, and interact more with each other, creating little teachers out of some of the brighter children, the teachers said.

"Either program can carry them through first and second grade," Bankhead said. "With this we hope to carry them through 10th, 11th and 12th grade."

Dorothy Kellberg, an administrator in the Board of Education's bureau of early childhood education, said: "We're changing, but, boy, it is a slow process. One of the bigger problems is not the teachers but the principals. Principals wanted more academic kindergartens."

Jacquelynne Gilmore, Woodson's principal, is among the few Chicago principals with a degree in early childhood education. She said she persuaded her kindergarten teachers to drop their academic orientation by telling them not to worry about the quarterly tests the School Board requires.

Gilmore postponed the November test until February. The children passed.

"Now my teachers know their children can learn through play, and I'm just delighted," she said.

Even if the pressure of testing is eased, however, it's unlikely that state-of-the-art advice will soon blossom into state-of-the-art teaching.

Experience with the School Board's new handbook for written composition shows that. Even principals who appreciate its emphasis on thinking and planning as opposed to grammar and punctuation feel at a loss to do much with it.

"It's a wonderful example of how not to implement a program," said Leroy Boyce, principal of Byford Elementary School and a "graduate" of the Illinois Writers Project, which teaches teachers to teach writing.

"Everything in this handbook is correct," he said. "But the process is left out. I worked five hours a day to learn how to do this. We're handed a book and told, 'Here is your new writing program. Good luck.' "

Most teaching is by the book, studies show. So teaching could get a tremendous boost if school reform extended to publishers. But change has been slow in coming.

"Publishers have such a stranglehold," said Morris of the National College of Education. "And they're a very conservative force."

However, a recent book said that educators deserved much of the blame for the "dumbing down" of textbooks.

In *A Conspiracy of Good Intentions: America's Textbook Fiasco*, Harriet Tyson-Bernstein says that state and local regulations, drafted with test scores in mind, are to blame for textbooks "that squander the intellectual capital of our youth."

"Instead of designing a book from the standpoint of its subject or its capacity to capture children's imagination," she said, "editors increasingly organize materials around the content and timing of standardized tests. As a result, publishers are encouraged to manufacture texts that are simple, boring and maybe even harder for students to understand."

Researchers at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois uncovered what has become a classic example of how simpler sometimes means harder.

The example is a reading-book adaptation of *The Shoemaker and the Elves* that mentions neither "shoemaker" nor "elves" nor even "shoes."

It read like this:

"Tap, tap, tap. See me work. I make good things. See the red ones. See the blue ones. See the yellow ones."

As the researchers on teaching and learning pressure publishers and seek the ear of educators, they also look to parents.

"You want to get parents on your side," said Jean Bell of the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project. "You want them to talk about what's going on in school in math. They should listen to what their children say and have conversations about math. There are games they could play too.

Bell recalled the reading experts' axiom that when children are read to, they learn to read. "Kids that are 'mathed to' will learn math," Bell said.

Schooling of toddlers isn't new

Is public schooling of toddlers a new trend? Hardly.

Consider the Puritans in early Massachusetts. They sent children to primary school as early as age 3. Children often learned to read at age 3 or 4 in order to read the Bible.

"At different times schools serve different functions in a society," said Bernard Spodek, a University of Illinois educator who has studied the history of early childhood education.

Early childhood education's purpose today is to help children become productive members of society and to provide day care, said Spodek, editor of a book titled *Today's Kindergarten*.

Kindergarten started in 19th-century Germany as a nature-oriented bridge between home and school, and in the United States became a vehicle to acculturate new immigrants, with kids attending in the morning and mothers in the afternoon.

Curriculum first focused on training kids to have proper habits, and later on helping them achieve "emotional catharsis" through creative arts, while John Dewey and Francis Parker pioneered child-centered schooling in Chicago.

As kindergartens were absorbed increasingly into public school systems, they focused first on readiness and then on academics.

While there are different approaches, early childhood education now seeks to balance learning and play, Spodek said, as more schools go to all-day kindergartens and to junior kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds.

"People are looking a lot more seriously at what kids learn and what is legitimate for young kids to learn," he said. "It's a very exciting time."

And if you don't like the latest theories, take heart: Schooling isn't mandatory in Illinois until age 7 anyway.

8 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 4

How parents are failing to prepare kids

Many kindergartners hurt

By Don Hayner and Neil Steinberg

A 5-year-old boy came to kindergarten at Drake Elementary School last year not knowing common words like "doll" and "cat."

He didn't know how to look at a picture book, or how to do things most children learn "from just being alive," said Judith Bowden, his teacher at Drake, 2722 S. King.

The boy's mother is illiterate and could not read to him, which Bowden said was a major cause of his school problems.

More than six of 10 children in city public school kindergartens are not read to by parents, according to teachers responding to a Chicago Sun-Times survey.

By comparison, nine of 10 kindergartners in Wilmette public schools are read to by their parents, as are 87 percent of middle- and upper-income children attending Chicago public schools. Yet experts say reading aloud to children is crucial to their educational development.

"The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. This is especially so during the preschool years," according to the landmark 1984 report Becoming a Nation of Readers by the Commission on Reading.

One ongoing study by Linda Meyer, a senior scientist at the nationally recognized Center for the Study of Reading in Champaign, goes even further. Meyer's study suggests that parents reading to their children is not enough. There must be quality reading that involves an exchange of questions and insights between parents and children.

Teachers surveyed said six of 10 children have parents who do not know how to prepare them educationally for kindergarten. Teachers in Wilmette said only one of 10 children has such parents and slightly more than two of 10 middle- and upper-income Chicago children have parents who don't know how to prepare them.

Typical survey responses from kindergarten teachers:

"The children are left to take care of themselves." "Parents don't talk to children or ask them questions." "Nobody worked with these children. Television is their babysitter."

Many Chicago children are far behind when they start school. And while the study indicates parents want to help, it also shows they don't know how.

Educators, who for a long time looked within the school system for the key to academic improvement, are increasingly looking to parents.

"It is unlikely that we will be able to make a major difference for the child unless we place equal priority on education and academic remediation for the parent," warned a 1988 Ford Foundation study, Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families and Our Economic Future.

Once a young child falls behind, he may never catch up, said Burton L. White, director of the Center for Parent Education in Newton, Mass., and author of The First Three Years. He added:

"The child who is delayed at age 3 when he enters Head Start invariably, with virtually no exceptions, is behind on language. And if he's nine months or more behind on language, the chances are very good he'll never be an average student. Ever. The probability that any Head Start program is going to make him even an average student is very, very low."

Teachers said some parents don't even talk to their children.

"Many young parents don't know, for example, that even though a child is not verbal the mother or father being verbal helps language develop," said Laura Davon, spokeswoman for Ounce of Prevention, a statewide project assisting children at risk.

Besides lacking basic parenting skills or information, parents have some ideas that are just plain wrong.

"When you think you've heard the worst, something the next day always tops it," said Cheryl Stampley, a nurse working with new parents at the Robert Taylor Homes.

Often, mothers feel that showing attention to newborns will "spoil" them. Some fathers feel that, until they are 6 months old, babies cannot see. Or hear. Or feel pain.

A surprising number of parents will not put their children in a crib. They're afraid of crib death, although the crib itself, of course, has nothing to do with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

A parent does not have to be poor to be overwhelmed with the responsibility of child rearing. Middle-class parents also frequently don't know what children need.

"As bright as they are, they are totally unprepared (to be parents)," said Pat DeMar, director of a Family Focus drop-in center in Lincoln Park.

While poor parents may lack knowledge, said DeMar, affluent parents, ironically, sometimes have too much.

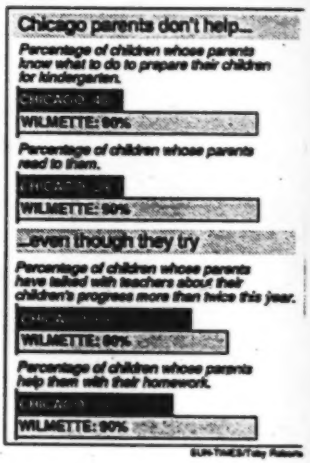
"They read numerous books, on child bearing, on child rearing, but they reach a point where they're so well-read they lack security in their own instincts," DeMar

Continued on Page 9

SUN-TIMES Photos/Honey Shooter

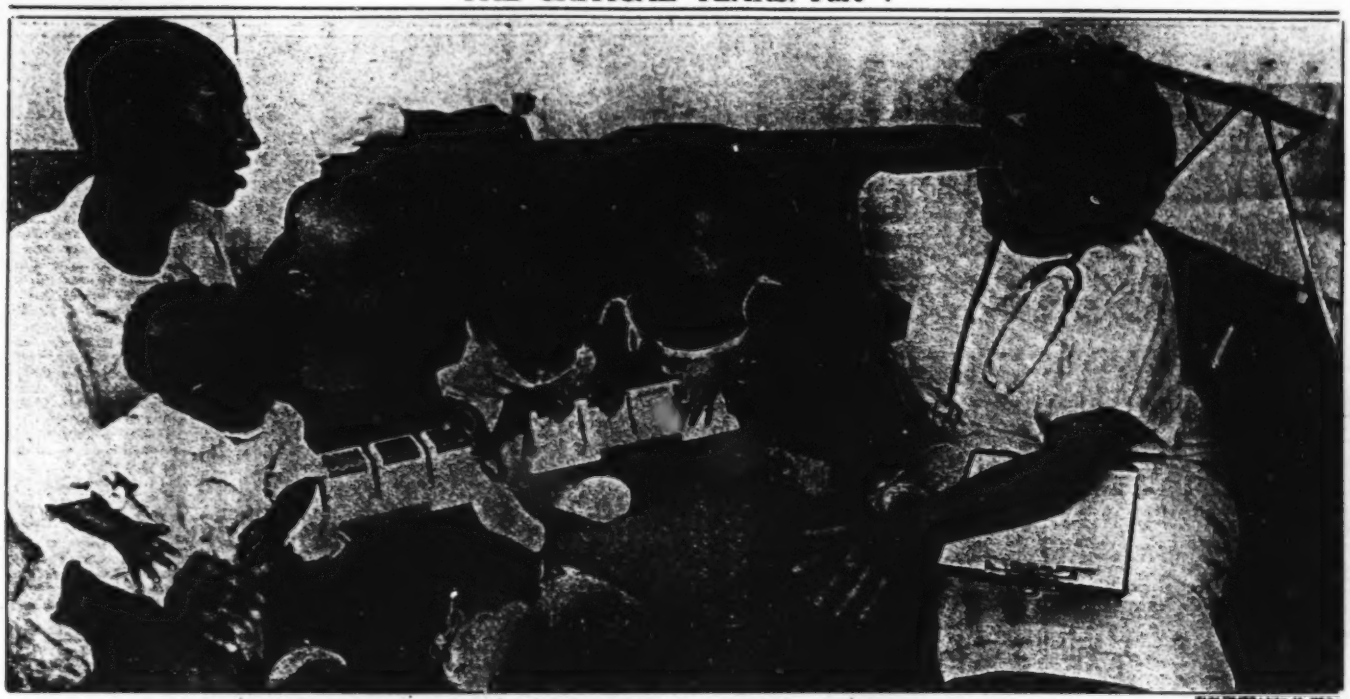
Pat DeMar, director of the Family Focus drop-in center, plays with 1-year-old Taylor Krislov. She says many middle-class parents don't know what kids need.

"There is that tug-of-war between being a responsible parent and doing what you want to do," said Laura Davon of Ounce of Prevention, a statewide project.


Chicago parents don't help...
Percentage of children whose parents know what to do to prepare their children for kindergarten.
CHICAGO: 41%
WILMETTE: 80%
Percentage of children whose parents read to them.
CHICAGO: 63%
WILMETTE: 90%
...even though they try
Percentage of children whose parents have talked with teachers about their children's progress more than twice this year.
CHICAGO: 63%
WILMETTE: 80%
Percentage of children whose parents help them with their homework.
CHICAGO: 59%
WILMETTE: 90%

SUN-TIMES/Toby Roberts

THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 4



SUN-TIMES / John H. White

Cheryl Stampley, a nurse at the Beethoven Project, talks to Penny Hereford and her children in the South Side center.

Parents failing to prepare kids

Continued from Page 8

said.

"I worked at Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor, and I saw better parenting because they felt their instincts were OK."

Without adequate parental involvement, children can be so far behind when they enter school they have great difficulty catching up, even if the school does its job.

At Terrell Elementary School, 5410 S. State, next to the Robert Taylor Homes, fourth-graders made a year's worth of progress in reading during 1987. Yet they still remained about 1½ years behind the national norm.

"We have to work twice as hard to get the children half as far," said Terrell Principal Reva Hairston.

Parents often instill in their children a distaste for school that never goes away.

One young mother, Kathy Jackson, sees her lack of participation as the cause of her son Robert, 11, having trouble in elementary school.

"He's not interested in school," said Jackson.

"I didn't read to him, I didn't do anything with him. I believe that had a lot to do with it."

She said she has begun to read to her younger son, Rodney, who is enrolled in the Dewey Child Parent Center, 639 W. 54th Pl., and that he seems to like school.

Many parents are illiterate. One of every three to four adults in Chicago is functionally illiterate.

From 650,000 to 1 million Chicagoans above the age of 16 read below the sixth-grade level. Only one-half of 1 percent of these adults are enrolled in literacy programs, according to the Chicago Literacy Coordinating Center.

Illiteracy itself, though, needn't prevent a parent from enriching a child's early years and helping to foster a desire for learning.

"Even if you can't read yourself, you can contribute by telling your child anything from fairy tales to stories of your childhood," said James Garbarino, president of the Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child Development.

"You create a social event in which the child begins to get the idea of gaining meaning."

Many parents are themselves children. In 1986, 9,989 children were born to teenage parents in Chicago. If these children were entering Chicago public schools today, they would represent one-third of all kindergartners. Studies show teenage parents are more hostile and punitive to their children. They also don't talk or listen to them as much as older parents do.

"I was 15 when I had my little girl," said Estasia, a mother in the Beethoven Project, which assists parents in caring for their children. "I had to give up cheerleading. I loved that uniform. She was my responsibility, from the moment I got home from school."

"There is that tug-of-war between being a responsible parent and doing what you want to do," said Deven of Ounce of Prevention.

"Often young parenting increases the incidence of child abuse and neglect. We've seen that in news accounts of the last couple months, where a mom left her baby in a cold garage. Many young moms might think it is OK to leave an infant in that situation for a couple hours."

More than 10 percent of the babies born in Chicago are also dangerously underweight, according to the Public Health Department. Low birth weight is caused by a range of prenatal factors, from drug abuse to poor nutrition to depression.

Low birth weight is a factor in 70 percent of Chicago's infant mortalities, and surviving low-weight infants have a greater chance of suffering physical and mental handicaps.

Most poor parents want the best for their children, according to the Sun-Times study. They just don't know how to get it.

The survey shows that 60 percent of parents come to school to discuss their children's progress more often than the two times required to pick up report cards.

"You don't discuss your child's progress unless there is interest," said Ted Sanders, Illinois education superintendent.

And nearly six of 10 try to help their child with homework, according to the study.

"I've never met a parent who didn't want her child to succeed, but some of them don't know what to do," said Reva Hairston, principal at Terrell for the last 12 years.

"So much depends on the home life and how much parents do with their children as far as listening and talking to the child," one teacher wrote, echoing a sentiment of many of those surveyed.

Although a minority, some parents seem to have almost no involvement with their children's education after they start school.

About 14 percent of children have parents who have never come to school, not even to pick up their children's report cards.

"Many children raised themselves, and come to school when they feel it's time," said Pam Stevens, director of the Dewey Child Parent Center. "I went to a house on a home visit, and the door was open, the babies walking around, and the parents nowhere to be found."

Almost one of 10 children is regularly more than 15 minutes late for school, and 15 percent of all children miss more than five days of school a month, according to the Sun-Times study.

Bowden of the Drake school said she has one child who was absent 51 days and another who was absent 40 days this school year. "I think some parents are so overwhelmed with their own problem they can't see, so their priority is self-preservation."

Teachers say many parents don't like to visit schools because it reminds them of their own academic failure.

"When they come to school, it's because their children are destructive," said Dr. Grace Dawson, principal of Beethoven School. "They come to school for negative, not for positive, reasons."

While parental involvement will improve a child's chances of school success, increasing that involvement is not easy.

"It would be nice if we said to parents that involvement is in your child's best interest, and they would do it," said Dewey director Stevens. "But we have to use all kinds of bribes and incentives. We have to persuade. We have to be evangelical. There's a big gap between where we are and where we are supposed to be."

Parents can get help preparing kids

Spurred by "The Critical Years" series reprinted in this special section, the Chicago Public Schools Alumni Association has launched a campaign to help parents prepare their children for school.

"We are interested in making certain children get a good start in school so that they will graduate and become alumni," said Harriet O'Donnell, the association's executive director.

The campaign began when World Book-Childcraft donated 45,000 copies of its "Getting Ready for School" booklet to distribute to parents of kindergarten and preschool youngsters in the Chicago public schools. The booklet lists 108 skills kindergarten teachers want children to know before they start school and offers suggestions on what parents can do to help their children learn the skills, which range from being able to march to recognizing the primary colors.

The list was derived from a survey of 3,000 U.S. and Canadian kindergarten teachers sponsored by World Book-Childcraft.

CRITICAL YEARS: FOLLOWUP

The Chicago Public Library then agreed to make the booklet available in its regional and neighborhood branches. And the Chicago Region PTA asked members to help arrange parent training sessions at their schools.

WLS-TV plans to produce public-service announcements demonstrating some of the skill-building activities. One or more of the city's Spanish-language television stations is expected to join in.

World Book vice president Alvin Granowsky said the series "was a good example of how the media can alert people in a constructive way to an issue. . . . It started people thinking."

Copies of "Getting Ready for School" may be obtained by calling 881-8708 (for people living south of North Avenue) or 934-4206 (for those north of North Avenue.)

THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 4

Moms, dads get involved in education

By Don Hayner and Neil Steinberg

When Judy Holloway visited a young mother living on the impoverished north side of St. Louis, the mother was worried. Her 7-month-old baby couldn't crawl.

Holloway, trained through a unique statewide Missouri program as a "parent educator," had a hunch. And she was right.

"The child rarely had an opportunity to be on the floor," Holloway said.

She told the mother to put the child on the floor often "and just right away the baby started crawling."

A parent is a child's first and most important teacher. Yet parents, rich, poor and middle class alike, often don't know how to help their children develop, physically or mentally.

Some low-income mothers try to protect their children while limiting their opportunity to learn and grow. Some of the children crawl or walk later than they should because the mothers don't want the children on the floor with rat and roach poison.

Holloway sits in a crowded school annex office in St. Louis. She is surrounded by six other parent educators, all of them poring over lessons they will take to parents during home visits that day. They're part of a growing nationwide movement to educate parents and get them more involved in their children's education.

Missouri is at the front of this movement. It established a statewide Parents as Teachers program through the Early Childhood Development Act of 1984. The program is designed to help parents enhance their children's development from birth to age 3.

The law requires every school district in Missouri to offer parent training. In 1987, there were 83,000 Missouri families enrolled in the PAT program. By the 1988-89 school year, the state hopes to have 60,000 families enrolled.

Parent participation in the PAT program is voluntary but strongly promoted through community and mass media information campaigns.

"We have trained professionals from 26 states and there are programs operating in 20 states," said Mildred Winter, director of the National Center of Parents as Teachers at the University of Missouri at St. Louis.

The PAT program evolved from a pilot project started in 1981, based on theories of noted child development expert Burton L. White, who believes the first three years of life are crucial to intellectual development.

In the pilot program, first-time parents of 73 Missouri children received monthly home visits and attended monthly group meetings.

The parents were instructed in a wide range of child-rearing techniques and were encouraged to interact with their children through reading aloud and other activities.

Children whose parents received training "scored significantly higher on all measures of intelligence, achievement, auditory comprehension, verbal ability and language ability," according to an evaluation of the pilot program by the Research and Training Associates of Overland Park, Kansas.

Children of parents in the program performed well "regardless of socio-economic disadvantages and other traditional risk factors," the evaluation concluded.

Teen mothers in the Merramec Valley school district, southwest of St. Louis, have found the statewide program beneficial to themselves as well. They were encouraged to stay in school, and their dropout rate fell to zero. And in some child abuse cases in Missouri, judges ordered parents to participate in the PAT program as a condition for keeping their children.

Wilma Wells believes PAT makes a difference. She heads a group of parent educators stationed in the Banneker School, a center surrounded by housing projects on the north side of St. Louis.

On her desk is a plaque that reads: "It's better to build children than repair men."

Wells said low-income families tend to be suspicious of parent educators and sometimes fail to keep appointments. Many cancel without calling, sometimes just to take a car ride to a grocery store, which will spare them a walk or a bus ride with bulging bags.

"If you do things like call a day before . . . and if you stick and stay through missed appointments, after a year, or into the second year, they know you're not there to pry into their lives," said Wells. They know you're there to help, she said.

She says 16 percent to 17 percent of parents she helps train drop out of the PAT program, but those who continue with the program often gain a positive feeling for the school system.

When Wells knocks on the door of a two-flat, the door swings open and a smiling Khari Knighten, who's almost 3 years old, swings the door open and says, "Hi, teacher."

Khari and his mother, Debra, 28, welcome Wells as they would a neighbor invited over for coffee.

From her shoulder bag, Wells pulls a puzzle for Khari and his cousins, and then reviews the boy's progress with his mother. Wells encourages Debra to make cardboard puzzles for Khari and explains the importance of educational games.

When asked what she's gotten out of the program, Debra says shyly, "I've learned to be patient."

One Chicago program, though small, is gaining nationwide attention for its work with parents.

It's called the Center For Successful Child Development, but is nicknamed the Beethoven Project because it focuses on parents of children scheduled to enter kindergarten at Beethoven Elementary School in 1993. The school serves six buildings at the Robert Taylor Homes housing project.

The project, which was launched last November, will provide the children and their parents with special services over the next five years. Mothers will receive counseling and classes in parenting. Children will attend preschool.

About 190 parents take part in the pilot program, which focuses on the time the child is born until he enters kindergarten.

"Parents in the program listen more," said Haroldine Bourelly, community linkages director of the program. "They don't yell at their child as much. They don't hit their child as much."

The program is funded in part by philanthropist Irving Harris.

In stark contrast to the surrounding decay, the Beethoven project is a spanking new, modern facility, with a medical clinic and colorful, toy-strewn play areas where children are supervised while parents meet to take classes or exchange information.

One of the nation's first family programs, Family Focus, was founded 12 years in Chicago by Bernice Weissbourd. It runs seven drop-in centers around the city, from Lincoln Park to the South Side. "We have classes, workshops, meetings," said Blanca Almonte, director of Family Focus West Town. "We try to provide parents with accurate information. Many parents really believe that if you pick up a child too much, you will spoil him."

"It helped me a lot not to yell at them or hit them, do something wrong," said Celestine Miranda, a West Side mother in the Family Focus program. "I used to get home and feel a lot of pressure I didn't want. They used to watch a lot of TV. Now they don't have the time (because of their activities from Family Focus). I thought it (parenthood) was easy. I thought it was all fun."

"I don't think we're scratching the surface in Chicago," said Weissbourd, Family Focus president. "The need is enormous, every community should have a family resource program, and they exist in few communities."

Other communities across the country are experimenting with parent education.

In Benton Harbor, Mich., parents help manage the elementary schools and develop curricula. Some parents are paid to help in the classroom and others are encouraged to volunteer.

About 75 percent of the 7,000 students in the program are from low-income families. Despite the poverty, a school development program modeled on the theories of James Comer, a Yale professor of child psychiatry, is showing promise.

Comer started his program in two schools with the worst academic records in New Haven, Conn. Now, children in those schools are among the state's top academic performers.

Since 1982, the Comer method has been introduced slowly on the grade-school level, and fourth grade math and reading scores have more than doubled.

Comer's method calls for management teams representing parents, teachers, mental health services and administrators. The teams set goals and arrange activities for the year.

Some parents, such as Donna Green, are paid $3.35 an hour, for about 15 hours a week to help out at school. Green has a son at Hull Elementary School and started volunteering in the fall of 1984.

Since Green became involved in the school, she's finished high school, has enrolled in college and is well on her way to becoming a teacher. She's on the dean's list at Western Michigan.

Being present at a school does more than help an individual parent.

"They become your goodwill ambassadors to the community," said Russell Tynes, the Hull principal.

Associated Press

Mildred Winters, director of the National Center of Parents as Teachers, in her office on the south campus of the University of Missouri at St. Louis.

Pointers to smooth early years

A summary of rules of good parenting from early-childhood experts:

- **Love your child even before birth.** Say no to drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and junk food during pregnancy; maintain a loving, relaxed attitude toward the unborn child; consider spacing children 2½ years apart.
- **Provide a responsive environment for your child.** Provide an interesting environment for the child to view, listen and explore; respond to calls for attention but tell toddlers to wait a minute if you're busy.
- **Talk to your child.** Talk to your child from birth; use specific language, not baby talk; talk about shared experiences and memories; ask curiosity-provoking questions; watch TV shows with kids and discuss them.
- **Listen to your child.** Try to see things from your child's perspective as you interact; try to explain the meaning of an activity to them and what they may learn from it; don't insist on doing it your way.
- **Believe in your children and let them believe in themselves.** Encourage them to be themselves, not just to do things well; be more affirming than judgmental.
- **Let your child find positive role models in the community.** Provide opportunities to establish relationships with significant adult friends; go on field trips.
- **Play with your child.** Play regularly with babies; play games as a learning activity; if the child asks about the stars, tell him or her about them and make it a playful activity but not a lecture on astronomy.
- **Read to your child.** Set aside time each day to read to children or tell stories; make the stories a jumping-off point for discussion; let preschoolers help draw pictures of stories or help write shopping lists; make scrapbooks with kids.
- **Guide more than punish.** Use gentle humor; look for causes of problems and seek to remove them if possible; set clear behaverial rules based on each child's ability to understand consequences; state your feelings clearly.
- **Impart a love of learning.** Make learning a joy; don't push; allow opportunities to play with words, use games for learning; examplify a love of culture and hard work; instruct and encourage them in organizing activities.

THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 5

'Invisible' gifted lost forever

By Ail Siewers

"I was never able to get along at school. I was always at the foot of the class. I used to feel the teachers did not sympathize with me and that my father thought I was stupid." —Thomas Edison

"[My father's] teachers reported ... that he was mentally slow, unsociable and adrift forever in his foolish dreams." —Albert Einstein Jr.

Leonard Myles spent his critical years learning to dive for cover when a gun went off or a car backfired.

Gang members tried to recruit him as a drug runner; he learned to ride the CTA by himself when he was 4½.

And when he started boarding a big yellow bus to go off to school in first grade, other kids living in the Cabrini-Green housing project laughed because they thought he was going to a school for the handicapped.

He wasn't. Leonard is one of America's "invisible" gifted children—bright, economically disadvantaged kids from the inner city who experts say are too often overlooked.

In kindergarten he was recognized as bright by school staff and enrolled in a magnet school for gifted children, the cream of the city's primary pupils.

And when Leonard's performance in school slid into the middle-grade slump that hits many inner-city students, his mother packed up the family and moved them out of Cabrini-Green and into a Humboldt Park apartment.

Nine-year-old Leonard is doing better at school since the move.

"I dream about going to Harvard and being an architect," he said.

"Don't never say never," added his mother Shirley Jones, a 28-year-old public-school dropout who, with four children, no husband and 10 years of life spent in Cabrini-Green, still dreams of being a lawyer herself someday.

Seated in a folding chair in their near-empty apartment, Board of Education social worker Jose Nobrida dreams of sending Leonard even farther away from the projects, to a private boarding school.

"There are a lot of Leonards in Cabrini-Green, a lot in the Robert Taylor Homes, in the projects or houses like this," Nobrida said.

"I bet you that one of those kids across the street there, given the chance, given the opportunity, would really blossom educationally," Nobrida said, pointing to Hispanic children playing on the sidewalk along Augusta Boulevard. "The problem is that we don't have that many programs."

Educators concerned with encouraging the development of bright inner-city children like Leonard are focusing on the critical first years of life.

Without encouragement then, Nobrida and others say, such "rare" children are more likely to end up gang leaders than architects.

Exact definitions of giftedness vary widely, as do estimates of what percentage of kids are gifted and how to identify them.

It involves an "abnormal" ability to think and experience life at high levels of critical and creative thought, and it appears in kids without regard to income, address or even success in school.

But while the Chicago Public Schools have nationally recognized programs for gifted children, the focus of programs generally for disadvantaged children remains on helping those who are behind to catch up, not to get ahead.

This year Chicago schools spent about $306 million on special education, but only about $3 million for gifted education.

Though some additional programs also target above-average pupils, Chicago has no gifted bilingual or preschool services, and existing gifted programs can't fully cover the city or target potentially gifted disadvantaged children.

"We're deeply concerned with minority youngsters being brought forward to grade level, but not with carrying them beyond, and I think that's deeply regrettable," said Dorothy Sisk, a former director of the U.S. Office of Gifted and Talented who in the 1970s argued unsuccessfully for a federal strategy to spur above-average development of inner-city kids.

Some educators studying the critical years and disadvantaged kids who bounce back later in life say that "above-average" could turn out to be "normal" if children were given the right opportunities and expectations.

Neuroscience research indicates "we're probably creating giftedness by what we do or don't do," said gifted-expert Barbara Clark of California State University.

"It's not surprising that kids from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds should come to a bad end; what's more surprising is that most of those kids do well to OK, and we can't explain that," said University of Chicago psychologist Bertram Cohler, co-editor of the recent book The Invulnerable Child.

A survey cited in the book of 400 famous men and women of the 20th century showed three-quarters of them as children were under heavy stress from poverty, broken homes, domineering or absent parents, various handicaps and illnesses.

A study of hundreds of children who grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s found many in later years turned childhood adversity into success.

An active and optimistic disposition, supportive adult role models, and a cohesive and warm family or extended family are keys to such resilience in children, as are other factors such as church attendance.

A University of Illinois study of parents with gifted children compared to parents of non-gifted children found that the first group encouraged children to participate in decision-making, engaged in activities related to those that the children would experience in school, and spent more time reading to children, asking and answering questions, and sharing their own activities with them.

"One thing that is very beneficial to a child is reading to a child, helping him to expand his interests, showing an interest in what he is doing, encouraging his language development, so he can express himself and reinforce his feelings of worth," said University of Illinois gifted-expert Merle Karnes. "Many gifted children have really poor self-concepts, sometimes because they expect too much of themselves or sometimes because parents don't reinforce them as they should."

Interviews with families of disadvantaged gifted children in Chicago indicate they provided a warm, stimulating environment for their children, and some aggressively sought special programs for them.

But in terms of the larger society, "we have the expectation that they can't possibly make it, and therefore we're not on the lookout for those kids who could really benefit from education," Cohler said.

Gifted students are easily bored in school and unusually sensitive. Studies show a surprising number of gifted young people end up in prison, and suggest a decline in intelligence scores and creativity among disadvantaged children generally as they go through school. Some survive as "invulnerable children" who may never realize their full potential to be gifted adults.

"Very little of the talk of school reform has dealt with gifted, it's usually a fairly low concern or priority in most school systems," said Board of Education gifted-program director Richard Renvik, whose programs serve 7 percent of public-school pupils.

Renvik said schools here do "pretty well" at finding bright children, thanks to staff like Nobrida, magnet programs, and local-school programs with flexible entry requirements. Experts outside the system concur.

But more resources would be needed to expand services and to encourage potential giftedness in disadvantaged children, as school districts elsewhere in the country are trying to do, he said.

"We're overrun with studies on the need for remedial skills, but we're not putting nearly enough emphasis on developing the gifted potential that's there in the inner city," said Mary Frasier, director of the Torrance Center on Creativity in Atlanta.

One child missed through lack of manpower was Cornelius Smith.

A second-generation resident of the Henry Horner Homes, he lives in the same apartment where his grandmother moved 18 years ago. His mother is a bright young woman who became addicted to drugs and no longer lives at home.

The 14-year-old often can be found playing basketball alone at a park away from the public-housing projects, or watching basketball on TV in his apartment. He keeps his distance from peers who have joined gangs.

"If I want to get away from here," he said, "I stay away from them."

In seventh grade he was still attending a school near the projects.

Teachers had tried unsuccessfully to transfer him out of the school, where his work was "real easy."

A year ago, thanks to a persistent counselor and Nobrida, he was enrolled in the Bell Regional Gifted Center, 2730 N. Oakley, which Leonard Myles also attends.

Since then Cornelius placed No. 3 citywide among top seventh graders who took the high-school Standardized Achievement Test, earning a score that was among the top 10 percent of high school juniors and seniors nationwide.

His grandmother's mailbox now is stuffed with letters from prestigious schools, including a high school scholarship offer from Phillips Academy in Massachusetts, though his family won't let him go so far from home.

When middle-class kids at the Bell center ask Nobrida how Cornelius can do so well at the school, Nobrida tells them, "It depends on the human being, it doesn't make any difference what the circumstances are, if he doesn't want those kinds of circumstances ... nobody's going to stop him. No-

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ELOI TEJEDO/Rich Hale

Cornelius Smith, a product of public housing, is a gifted student whose potential was recognized and who went on to be No. 2 in the city on advanced reading and math tests.

THE CRITICAL YEARS: Part 5

'Invisible' gifted lost forever

Continued from Page 11

body can."

However, Nebrida added: "The system itself discourages us, because they say they don't want an elite group. . . . There are so many Corneliuses around there, but without any chance, they just wither on the vine! So I kind of wish, if I look back now, I found him in first or second grade."

Gifted programs are crucial in the early years. But only about 4,000 of more than 12,000 children in all Chicago gifted programs are in kindergarten through third grade.

About half the city's elementary schools have no gifted programs, and those that do receive no extra staff.

And low-income children are a definite minority at top gifted magnet centers such as Leonard's, which serve intellectually gifted children and have rigorous entry requirements that are governed by court-mandated desegregation quotas.

While 78 percent of public elementary students are from poor families, only 24 percent of the approximately 1,500 pupils in gifted centers are low-income as measured by the percentage of children receiving subsidized lunches.

Support staff say there's a need for more room at regional gifted centers; for tutors in primary grades at centers to help disadvantaged kids; for more gifted programs in highly disadvantaged neighborhoods; for more gifted parental-involvement programs; more in-service training in gifted education for regular teachers; staff for neighborhood programs; gifted bilingual programs, and gifted preschool and community-outreach programs.

"We need to go out into the community . . . talk to the families, church groups and social agencies . . . into Little Village . . . If I were to go out there and say we are looking for these children you feel are the leaders, they could probably identify them," said Board of Education psychologist Rosina Gallagher.

Otherwise, she said, "The youngsters who come to us tend to come from parents who are already aware of what's available in the school system."

Erick Sosa, a seventh-grade son of Mexican immigrants, had to fight to stay in a gifted program. He attended the Bell center but during a middle-grade slump was transferred out into a regular classroom.

He might have stayed there if not for overcrowding that bumped him into a local gifted class. In sixth grade he was told that because he was in the gifted class only due to overcrowding, he couldn't take the entrance exam of a junior-high International Baccalaureate program for above-average students.

"Why can't I take the test?" he kept asking. The teacher relented.

"I took the test the same afternoon, and I got my grades and had a 96 and passed," Erick said proudly.

LaTasha Jackson, a bright-eyed and giggly second-grader, goes to one of the Chicago schools that don't have a gifted program, the Farren School at 5055 S. State St., across from the Robert Taylor Homes. Her mother, a single parent on welfare, is studying to earn a high-school equivalency diploma.

Teachers consider LaTasha gifted. She scores a year above grade level, finishes her work early, likes to grade classmates' papers at her teacher's desk, and often takes charge of the class when the teacher is gone.

"She doesn't like to think of herself as bright," said teacher Beverly Littleton-Harris. "She'll bring up a picture she's drawn and say, 'Isn't this ugly?' And I'll say, 'No it's beautiful.' "

Preschool expert Burton L. White has estimated that only one in 10 families provides a proper environment for children in the critical period between the ages of 8 months and 3 years. That corresponds with the percentage of gifted children found later in school, Clark said.

This ideal environment is responsive and communicative, not pressured; it lets the child guide playful learning that's based on high expectations.

SUN-TIMES/Keith Pitts

Nine-year-old Leonard Hytes is one of the "invisible" inner-city gifted students who has flourished in a special program and now dreams of being an architect.

"Our genetic program is not a limit for us, it's a pattern, and it's only a limit when we went to impose other patterns on it," such as limiting kids' learning according to age, or emphasizing the rational at the expense of the emotional, physical and intuitive, Clark said.

Still, Cohler emphasizes that resilient children aren't "doomed" by bad circumstances early on.

And Wilbur Brookover of Michigan State University doesn't even like using the label "gifted;" he says it lowers expectations for children who lack it.

Brookover investigated a low-income black elementary school in Mobile, Ala., that had exceptional above-average performance on tests by pupils.

While the school had received funding for compensatory education, it had used the money to bolster regular classes instead.

Brookover found the staff upholding "a clear belief that the children could learn and assuming responsibility for teaching them; they expected them to do well and did very little if any differentiating among students."

There were no compensatory programs at the school, no officially identified low achievers, and little low achievement.

Likewise, child-parent centers in Chicago in the early 1970s produced inner-city primary-grade pupils who scored above national norms thanks to parental involvement, high expectations and extra resources.

But without early support, bright disadvantaged children not identified in preschool "many times will camouflage their gifted characteristics and may never be identified," said Irving Sato, director of the California-based National State Leadership Training Institute.

Three years ago, Deirdre Thompson, now 7, was identified as potentially gifted in a federally sponsored pilot project in Champaign-Urbana that targeted an often neglected group: smart preschool children from the inner city.

The project, which Karnes developed, took all the Head Start children and worked with them using gifted-education techniques.

Lessons were aimed at playfully stimulating a child's thinking and problem-solving skills, through activities such as playing detective and making inventions. The program also included special work with parents.

Being gifted can include "academic talent, creativity, visual and performing arts, leadership, social-emotional (qualities)," and perhaps for the very young psychomotor skills, Karnes said. "The key to a program for the gifted is a teacher who is flexible, who is very open and picks up cues from the children."

Certain children like Deirdre—who lives in a one-parent family on welfare in a mainly black public housing project—were identified as potentially gifted.

Both gifted and non-gifted children showed significant growth as compared to another group of Head Start children who didn't participate and whose creativity scores actually declined during preschool.

The attitude of teachers toward children in the special program also was found to be significantly more positive as compared to the regular program.

But this year when Karnes tried to introduce the same Head Start curriculum to programs in Chicago, a Department of Human Services' advisory panel turned thumbs down.

The reasons cited for the rejection represent common obstacles to those who would encourage bright young inner-city kids: Disagreement about what's the best way to do so without over-pressuring them, and concern about the response of parents and children who aren't labeled gifted.

By contrast, kindergarteners at the Burbank Regional Gifted Center, 2035 N. Mobile, recently were learning Latin and discussing why astronauts wear spacesuits, in a kindergarten room that boasts three computers.

An observer might assume they all had gone to preschool, said teacher Laura Leddy. "But a number of these children grew up in homes where they have their moms stay home, and some of the mothers have been teachers themselves — the parents have given them a lot at home."

Meanwhile, Deirdre switched school systems after Head Start, didn't receive special screening, and this year was in a regular first-grade class.

Her first-grade teacher didn't know Deirdre was identified as potentially gifted in preschool and considered her "very immature" though bright.

The girl still exhibits traits of a disadvantaged, potentially gifted child who may go unrecognized: She excels among other classmates from the projects, exhibits unusual sensitivity (or "immaturity"), is creatively gifted, outstanding in art, and according to her mother does "weird things" at home like carry around a Word Search puzzle book as a favorite toy.

A number of cities are starting alternative and bilingual gifted programs to find and support such bright disadvantaged children in the primary grades, kindergarten and preschool.

A few states fund gifted preschool programs.

San Diego last year introduced gifted curriculum to all kindergarten and first- and second-graders in 10 inner-city schools, offering special help to those identified as bright.

In Montgomery County, Md., a primary-grade program in recent years has resulted in several hundred children once identified as non-gifted being re-evaluated by test scores as gifted children, after special help.

Donnelly Gregory, director of the program, recalls how some classroom teachers recoiled in disbelief when certain disadvantaged or minority children were selected. They were known to be "problems," not top pupils.

Later, classroom teachers complained that "the [special] teacher gets all the good kids," Gregory said.

"To create a whole breed of gifted kids by special intervention is not too bad an idea," Ronvik said.

But to try here, he added, "I would sure want more power, more horses, more people, more money, because the potential is pretty enormous; everybody could be part of the potential that's a little above average.

"We could work with all of those kids—and in a way that's what a school is supposed to be."

Said Cohler, "Part of it is tailoring curriculum to recognize kids' competences, and part of it is being on the lookout for bright kids who have the ability to do well in school, because those are the children who otherwise are most likely to become delinquent."

If bright inner-city children were given greater prominence, Nebrida said children like Cornelius Smith would become role models.

Ideally, rather than formal gifted programs, Clark said, "I'd rather approach it the other way, allowing an enriched environment to be provided all the way through for all children—however we're not doing that, and we can't allow those [bright] children to get caught."

In a "responsive environment" for all children, gifted children would be noticed and encouraged, Clark said. "If we were just moving in that way, not deciding what someone should know and doing only that, I don't think we know what the results would be."